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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

26 January 1971

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Nature and Extent of the Soviet Military Commitment to the UAR

NOTE: At the meeting of the Senior Review Group on January 11 intelligence views were solicited on the following questions:

(a) Must we assume that the Soviets will respond indefinitely with more and better military assistance to the UAR each time they believe we have given new military aid to the Israelis? Can the limits to which the Soviets are prepared to go be defined?

(b) Could and/or would the Soviets move rapidly to bring massive military support to the UAR in a moment of crisis as, for example, if they anticipated a new Israeli move to strike preemptively at the UAR forces?

The following Memorandum addresses these two questions in order, with a summary in the last two paragraphs.

The Soviet Attitude Toward Arms Supply Competition in the Middle East

1. Soviet military support for the UAR is not the only element in their present close relationship, but it has been a constant and indispensable one, especially since the 1967 war. The political and military collapse of

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the Egyptian government under Israeli military pressure would be seen by the Soviets as a grave, perhaps fatal, setback to their whole position in the Middle East. Fear that this might happen figured heavily in the crucial Soviet decisions to begin restoring the UAR's losses in military equipment as soon as the 1967 war was over, and to commit Soviet SAM crews and MIG pilots to the defense of the UAR early in 1970.

2. With these decisions the Soviets may find themselves more deeply and directly involved in the military aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict than they had originally intended. While their influence in Egypt has grown along with their commitment, so have their risks; they are far from having the kind of control over events that they would like. For this reason, they may now hope that their military assistance will not have to go beyond its present quantitative and qualitative level. But what they hope, and what they may find necessary or expedient under the pressure of events, are not necessarily the same thing.

3. It is unlikely that Moscow has given the UAR an open-ended military commitment; probably Egypt has only general assurances concerning the continued flow of arms. Decisions as to the type and amount of assistance are likely to be made, in the light of prevailing circumstances, according to certain general considerations: What is needed to prevent a repetition of the

kind of military humiliation which Israel inflicted on Egypt in 1967 and again with its deep-penetration raids in 1970? Will the granting of more and different kinds of military support be required to bolster the UAR's self-confidence and to strengthen its bargaining position vis-a-vis the Israelis? Or will additional assistance at some point cause the UAR to overrate its strength and to act in a way which might create serious hazards for the USSR? In general, the Soviets want to provide the UAR with a greater degree of military security, while avoiding anything which would encourage a resumption of major hostilities.

4. It is doubtful in any case that the Russians would consider it practical, even if desirable, to provide the UAR with a clear-cut military superiority over Israel. This would be ruled out by the very great innate disparities in the military effectiveness of Egypt and Israel -- notably in the capacity of the UAR to make effective use of large quantities of new equipment. The Soviets would almost certainly calculate, moreover, that the US would give offsetting assistance to Israel. Presumably also Moscow would not want to assume the political and military risks and the economic costs which a further spiral of the arms race would entail.

5. On the other hand, it is even more doubtful that the Soviets would want to see a further increase in Israel's relative military advantage. They

would be strongly disposed to compensate for any steps taken by the US which appeared to alter the existing military equation. They would find it especially necessary to react if the effect of the US action was to strengthen Israel's offensive capability.

6. For political reasons and to limit uncontrollable risks, however, the Soviets would probably provide mainly defensive weapons in any new supply effort for Egypt. If, for example, the US furnished Israel with additional fighter-bombers, the Soviets would probably again strengthen Egyptian air defenses by providing more SAMs and anti-aircraft artillery together with improved radars and electronic equipment.

7. But Soviet options are now limited by the UAR's meager ability to absorb additional quantities of equipment. Egypt lacks reserves of trained manpower both for operations and maintenance. The Soviets have already supplied virtually all types of their newest and best defensive equipment to Egypt. If a rapid and substantial increase in Egypt's defensive capabilities were sought, the Soviets would have to supply more men as well as equipment. In particular, if the Israeli offensive threat appeared to grow substantially, the Soviet leadership might accede to pressure, either from the Egyptians or from its own military establishment, for further direct involvement of Soviet military personnel in the UAR's defenses.

8. Thus the Soviets will do what is necessary to maintain the new balance if Israeli capabilities are increased by US aid. If they did not, their effort on behalf of Egypt over the last year, which has at least denied the Israelis the capability to punish Egypt at will and at slight cost to themselves, would be wasted. It is just possible, however, that at this point, rather than see a new upward spiral in the Middle East arms race, the Soviets would at last be prepared to agree with the US, perhaps only informally, to freeze further arms supply to the two sides. They could reason that Egypt is relatively more secure now than it has ever been, that a new round in the supply contest would be costly and would increase the uncontrollable elements in the situation, and that a military stalemate would increase pressures on Israel in the new phase of diplomatic bargaining now beginning.

Soviet Options in Case of Renewed Arab-Israeli Crisis

9. The Danger of Renewed Hostilities. At present, Israel lacks incentive and Egypt lacks capability to launch major hostilities deliberately. But the negotiations are fragile enough and the situation along the Canal is tense enough to bring a breakdown of the ceasefire. Although the Israelis have taken advantage of the military "standstill" to shore up the Bar Lev defense line, the Egyptians have substantially increased the numbers of their artillery pieces. The strengthened SAM defenses on the Egyptian side would

make it difficult, or at least quite costly, for the Israelis to silence the Egyptian artillery. Rather than suffer heavier losses in a resumed "war of attrition" the Israelis could decide to retaliate elsewhere on UAR territory.

10. If this happened, the considerations that caused the Soviets to react to Israel's deep-penetration raids would again cause them to seek to check the Israelis. Some of these considerations may in fact have become more urgent. They might have greater reason to fear for the survival of Sadat's regime than of Nasser's in similar circumstances. Because their own military role has expanded, they have even greater concern for saving face and for demonstrating the efficacy of their arms. Thus they would probably feel obliged to give the UAR substantial assistance. While they would be sensitive to the risk of involving the US, they would probably believe that defensive action on behalf of a friend under attack within its own boundaries would give them a fair margin of safety and justification.

11. Soviet Capabilities to Reinforce the Egyptian Front. Whether the Soviets could readily find an effective and timely response to any Israeli military initiatives against the UAR is, however, another matter. Soviet decisions about what was required would depend on the nature and duration of the Israeli challenge. Israeli actions, even if on a fairly significant scale, might be rapidly launched and of short duration. In that case, the Soviets

would have to respond -- if they did respond with their own forces -- with what they have in the UAR now. This would mainly involve their combat air units; the Mediterranean squadron would have little utility for the defense of Egyptian territory. They could, however, follow up their immediate action with further measures of military support designed to prevent or cope with any repetition of the Israeli attack.

12. If the Soviets anticipated or were actually confronted with a more drawn-out Israeli military move -- one taking place over a week or so -- they would be able to move in additional equipment and personnel. Between 7 June and 3 July 1967, the Soviets made some ☐ military transport flights to the Middle East carrying equipment to replace Arab losses. Ample merchant shipping is available for massive supply/resupply efforts, but this means of delivery would take longer. It is three days steaming time from Odessa to Alexandria. Additional time would be required for loading -- provided the equipment and supplies were already available on the docks at Odessa or other Black Sea ports. But equipment alone would not meet the immediate need, given the limits on Egypt's absorptive capacity noted in paragraph 7, above. A further major increase in capability on the Egyptian side would now require the introduction of additional Soviet combat personnel.

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13. Some Soviet combat units could be sent to Egypt fairly promptly. Soviet medium bombers and transports could be flown directly to the UAR,

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given likely clearance from Yugoslavia for overflights. Soviet fighters and fighter bombers lack the range for such direct flights and do not have an inflight refueling capacity. In an extreme emergency, the USSR might be willing to risk the political complications of overflights of Iran and Turkey to staging bases in Syria. Their more likely course, however, would be to fly disassembled fighters aboard Soviet transport aircraft to the UAR where reassembly and testing would require 3-5 days. Tanks and armored personnel carriers -- basic equipment for mobile, desert warfare -- could not be flown to the UAR in significant numbers.

14. Soviet Intentions in the Event of Renewed Hostilities.

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25X1 [redacted] the Soviets do not wish to see the ceasefire break down. They are concentrating their effort on a diplomatic campaign, through Jarring and the Four, to wring concessions from Israel on the subject of withdrawal. They apparently believe that political pressures on Israel show at least some promise of bringing movement toward Arab objectives, and thus of helping to consolidate the Soviet position in the area. Military pressures on Israel are not only unpromising but at the present level of confrontation carry high risk of direct involvement with the US.

15. If, however, it was the Israelis who initiated major military action, the Soviets would almost certainly feel that they had no choice but

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to help the Egyptians to avoid a new humiliation. Failing to do so after having committed themselves so deeply could be fatal to their whole position in Egypt. Soviet advisers and combat personnel would therefore participate fully in the defense of Egyptian territory, and reinforcements from the USSR would probably be brought in if the action continued. As they did last summer, Soviet pilots would probably engage penetrating Israeli aircraft, and in the circumstances posited here, hot pursuit actions by Soviet planes beyond Egyptian territory could not be excluded.

16. Even in the case of a renewed Israeli military assault on Egypt the Soviets would probably not sponsor or participate in a major counter-offensive against Israeli-held territory. the Soviets consider that an Egyptian attempt to cross the Canal in force is almost certain to fail, leaving their allies and themselves in a worse military and political situation than before. Soviet involvement in any such deliberate offensive action, which would have to be overt and on a major scale, would be seen as a large step toward a direct confrontation with the US. Moscow would probably prefer to exploit a renewed Israeli resort to force by political and diplomatic efforts directed towards the isolation of Israel and its condemnation by the international community.

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17. In sum, the Soviets regard the survival of their Egyptian clients as essential; they are determined to prevent changes in the Arab-Israeli military balance to the serious disadvantage of the UAR, and they will provide what military assistance they believe may be required to forestall such changes. But they do not desire a resumption of major hostilities in the area, and for the foreseeable future they will probably continue to confine their military assistance to weapons and equipment more suitable for defense than for offense. They are highly unlikely to join their own forces with those of the UAR in a deliberate major assault on Israeli-held territory.

18. If the Soviets anticipated or were confronted with an Israeli preemptive strike against UAR forces on any significant scale, or a major Israeli incursion into UAR territory, they would probably increase the involvement of their own forces in the UAR's defense. Israeli air forces would have to cope with Soviet as well as UAR air units. Reinforcements from the USSR would probably be brought in if the action were long-continued and going badly for the UAR. But the action would be essentially defensive; the Soviets would probably not join the UAR in a preemptive attack upon Israel, or in a major counteroffensive into Israeli-held territory after the initial Israeli onslaught had been repelled.

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MEMORANDUM FOR: The Director

This Memorandum has had some tinkering in earlier paragraphs, including a re-write of the introductory note to make more explicit the order of march in the text. Beginning at paragraph 14 John and I have done some substantial rewriting. I am not sure that everything is properly fixed, but we have tried.

6-DCI
1-DOJ

ABBOT SMITH
Director

Attachment:
Memorandum, Dated ^{26 Jan 71} ~~1 Feb 71~~,
"The Nature and Extent of the 1 Feb 71
Soviet Military Commitment to the UAR" (DATE)

FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101
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MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable David Packard

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This memorandum is self-explanatory.

Rich
Richard Helms

Attachment - 1
Memo of 26/1/71 - The Nature and Extent of the
Soviet Military Commitment to the UAR.

2 February 1971
(DATE)

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FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101
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